THE BATTLE
A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF WILSON'S CREEK, ITS SIGNIFICANCE, AND THE CIVIL WAR IN MISSOURI

By Kenneth Elkins

On the cold, clear night of February 7, 1861, Captain Nathaniel Lyon led his company of U.S. infantrymen from Fort Riley, Kansas, off railroad cars at Union Depot in St. Louis, Missouri and marched them to the Federal Arsenal, which local Unionists feared might fall under the control of Southern sympathizers. Just two months later the first shots of the American Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter in South Carolina and almost four months after that Lyon, with only three months experience as a newly appointed general, and hundreds of other men, were killed in a brutal battle along Wilson's Creek in southwest Missouri on a scorching morning in August. While Lyon undoubtedly was "an obscure infantry captain" before the war began, perhaps as much as any other man, he was responsible for bringing the war to Missouri. Unfortunately, the struggle for Missouri did not end with the deaths at Wilson's Creek. By war's end, Missouri not only had seen more military actions than any other state except Virginia and Tennessee, but the people of Missouri had also endured a bitter guerrilla struggle that cost over 25,000 civilian lives.

Prior to the Battle of Wilson's Creek President Abraham Lincoln instructed Major General John Fremont, before he assumed overall command of Union forces in the West in late July, that "you must use your own judgement, and do the best you can." Fremont considered possession of Missouri a key part of controlling the Mississippi River Valley, which would allow the Union to "hold the country by its heart." In other words, according to the historian Shelby Foote, while "Missouri was only a starting point," it was "essential to the plan" to control the Mississippi River to the gulf, including the vital cities of Vicksburg and New Orleans. Further, beyond the need to protect Missouri's Unionists, the state was important to the Union because of the manpower and agricultural produce it could contribute to the war effort, as well as serving as a potential staging point for a later invasion of the South. Finally, Missouri was crucial because by 1860 it supplied over 60% of the nation's lead. Later, after the Battle of Wilson's Creek, G. W. Clark, the Confederate Quartermaster at Fort Smith, Arkansas informed Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin that he believed that lead mines in southern Missouri could "furnish all that is wanted for the Confederate Army." Aside from these logical reasons for securing control of Missouri, Lyon's fanatical devotion to preserving the Union drove him to purge the state of those who were not of like mind.

From the time of his arrival in St. Louis, Lyon showed little interest in compromising with anyone who held Southern sympathies. In the weeks before the battle at Wilson's Creek, he had the weapons in the St. Louis Arsenal moved to a safe place, took prisoner hundreds of pro-secession Missouri militiamen gathered nearby at Camp Jackson, seized control of the capital in Jefferson City, refused to negotiate with pro-Southern leaders such as Missouri Governor Claiborne Jackson, routed Rebel forces at Boonville, Missouri's first battle, in mid-June, and then pursued them into southwest Missouri in mid-July. There, after more hard marching and inconclusive skirmishes, Lyon decided for three reasons to attack the Southern force camped on Wilson's Creek: nearly half of his men were at the end of their ninety day enlistment; to protect the pro-Union element in Springfield; and simply because it galled him to retreat without doing any serious damage to the Rebel cause in Missouri. Ironically, Southern leaders planned to march on Springfield the evening before but a local thunder shower forced them to remain in camp, though they failed to set adequate sentries.

Lyon's plan was as audacious as it was simple. After marching through the night, on the morning of August 10th, a Saturday, he attacked the Southern camps on Wilson's Creek from the north with 4200 troops while Colonel Franz Sigel's 1200 men struck from the south. By dividing his small force Lyon hoped to surprise the larger Southern army, damage it seriously, and drive it off before its leaders could bring their 12,000 men to bear on the attacking Federals. If it had not been for the murderous delaying fire of Captain William Woodruff's Confederate artillery battery at the outset of the battle and then Sigel's disastrous rout at 8:30 A.M. at the hands of Southern troops mistaken for gray-clad Iowans, Lyon might have succeeded. But the Confederate and Missouri State Guard forces under the leadership, respectively, of Generals Ben McCulloch and Sterling Price, refused to yield and, with Sigel's troops gone from the field, Lyon's men faced their enemies alone.

Though few of the troops on either side had seen full-scale combat, the two armies stood, with the glaring exception of Sigel's rout, in the worst of conditions and fought at close quarters on both sides of Wilson's Creek. The roar of battle was heard miles away, while on the high ground west of the creek, thereafter known as Bloody Hill, clouds of gunpowder smoke shrouded the wounded and the dead strewn across a devastated landscape. Lost in the searing sights and sounds of war, the two armies faced off in the merciless heat for what must have seemed like an eternity, though the battle actually lasted less than six hours and was broken by three clear lulls. One Union officer recalled after the battle that by 9:00 A.M. the "engagement . . . [became] almost inconceivably fierce along the entire line." While rallying his troops to meet this determined Southern assault, General Lyon, already twice wounded, died when a bullet

found his heart, though few were aware of his loss.

During the two hours after Lyon's death at 9:30, according to the senior Union officer, the "most bloody engagement of the day" occurred, during which the Federal line held "with perfect firmness" despite "the contending lines being almost muzzle to muzzle." By noon, Major Samuel Sturgis, who did not assume command of Union forces for nearly a half hour after Lyon's death because of the poor communications and confusion so common to the warfare of that day, ordered his exhausted troops to retreat after their ammunition ran low, leaving the field to the equally exhausted Rebels who, upon attacking for the fourth time, found only the wounded and the dead on Bloody Hill.

Despite their inexperience and the miserable conditions in which they strove, the opposing armies, with but a few exceptions, fought well. General John Clark, a division commander in the Missouri State Guard, exclaimed the morning after the battle while surrounded by the awful debris of war, "But didn't my men fight, though? Didn't they fight like devils?" Such sentiments were common on both sides. Edwin Nash, Adjutant for the 1st Kansas Regiment, in a letter informing Mrs. Hattie Jones of the death of her husband, First Lieutenant Levant Jones, wrote that "while our boys were being cut down by the dozens they never flinched a hair but stood their ground like old veterans." Sadly, in the course of such brave efforts, both veterans and the inexperienced suffered and died in the indiscriminate slaughter of the battle.

So ferocious was the fighting at Wilson's Creek, it is little wonder the casualty rates were so high. Over 530 men were killed during the battle while more than 1800 were wounded, many of them severely. Henry Martyn Cheavens, an infantryman with the Missouri State Guard, was struck by Federal artillery fire during the battle. A canister ball nearly severed the muscles and nerves in his right thigh while breaking the bone just above the knee. Though a friend endured two amputations and suffered "immensely" before dying six weeks later, inexplicably Cheavens avoided the deadly infections that too often resulted in further amputations and death. A clue to his survival, however, is suggested when Cheavens later wrote that "maggots crawled over me and in my wound and up my back till the bedclothes were just filled." Not until the early Twentieth Century would doctors understand that in terrible wounds such as his, maggots ate only the dead flesh and thus reduced the chances of infection. Though Cheavens and others survived their wounds, too many men went unattended for hours after the battle and died alone. But after the battle there would be little time to grieve for the dead or reflect on the fate of the wounded because the machinery of war had been set in relentless motion and would grind on for many months and years to come.

Southern forces at Wilson's Creek failed to take advantage of their hard-won victory and strike the Federal forces before

they retreated to Rolla and then St. Louis. Soon thereafter, while regular Confederate forces under General McCulloch returned to Arkansas, General Price led the Missouri State Guard north where, in mid-September, they captured and temporarily held the small community of Lexington on the Missouri River before retreating to the south. Thus, in the long run, Lyon's gamble at Wilson's Creek paid off; Southern forces were prevented from gaining control of all or part of Missouri in 1861 and the stage was set for the Union's decisive victory at Pea Ridge in northern Arkansas the next spring. Meanwhile, many of the men who fought at Wilson's Creek went on to fight in hundreds of other battles during the war, many of which would prove to be much like the one at Wilson's Creek: bitterly contested, costly, and too often inconclusive. Finally, and beyond the consequences of regular military actions, civilians in Missouri faced nearly three more years of grim guerrilla warfare during which marauding bands from both sides killed thousands of civilians and drove many others from their homes and farms. The legacies of that guerrilla warfare, as well as our memories of the men on both sides who fought valiantly in the bloody battle at Wilson's Creek, still remain with us.